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ABSTRACT

Divided into three major sections, this document defines rural, discusses the role of the National Diffusion Network (NDN), and summarizes the findings of the 17 research reports included in Abt Associates' study of the Experimental Schools Program for Small Schools Serving Rural Areas. Section I, a summary reproduction from recorded notes of an NDN conference meeting held in June 1980, contains comments concerning the definition of rural, the problems encountered in implementing innovative programs, and the role of the NDN in preparing the way for change. The views represent the collective impressions of the writers. Sections II and III consist of drafts of the document, "Federal Initiatives and Rural School Improvement: Findings from the Experimental Schools Programs." Based on an extensive research effort and directed primarily to those at the federal level responsible for the design and/or implementation of programs to facilitate educational improvement at the local level, these documents summarize findings from literature on the educational needs of rural America, note the relevance of the Experimental Schools Program to those needs, and present the major findings of the research in terms of the dynamics of rural school districts and in terms of the design and implementation of federal programs to facilitate rural school improvement. The second draft also includes recommendations. (CM)

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RURAL

What Is It And How Does The NDN Fit?

A Report Of

The

National Diffusion Network
Sectional Meeting
June 10, 1980

RURAL CONCERNS

by

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RURAL

What Is It And How Does The NDN Fit?

NDN Conference June 10, 1980

This is a summary report of a sectional meeting held at the Washington National Hotel June 10, 1980, entitled RURAL CONCERNS as a part of the National Diffusion Network Conference. The speakers were: Jay Matheson, SF, Marquett, Minnesota; Richard Peterson, SF, Marshall, Minnesota; Mike Owens, SF, Kilgore, Texas; Gene Johnson, SF, Staples, Minnesota and Polly Friend, Marquett, Minnesota.

The definition of "rural" is a matter of perspective on the part of the definer. A State Facilitator (SF) in a large Urban-like New York City may consider all towns under five million population as rural. In a town of half a million, all people over fifty miles away in towns of one hundred fifty thousand or less are considered to be in rural areas. In a town of twenty-five thousand the community of twenty-five hundred is rural and in a town of two thousand the community of two hundred is rural in the town of two hundred the people in the country are rural. It is clear from this population definition that rural is a condition and a state of mind, not a number or geographic location. For the purpose of our work, rural is defined as sparsity of people in an isolated area either geographically or in terms of educational ideas, with a mostly stable population and a personality type where the people feel they will have repeated contact with the State Facilitator. Rural is unique, and yet the human qualities of friendly, helpful and considerate are coupled with reserve and suspicion of intruders.

The rural schools are different from their urban and suburan counterparts in that the money available to schools of fewer than 500 students in grades K-12 if appropriated on attendance is less than adequate to meet the wide range of student needs. The demands by state departments of education for libraries, facilities, qualified staff, planning and evaluation and accrediation standards are identical for all schools, but in many rural schools the equal application of demands leads to unequal quality of education. Many rural schools remain on the edge of economic well being due to a small tax base and limited resources. As the economny declines in the nation as a whole, rural schools are more often feeling the loss of funds because they are closer to the edge of survival.

The achievement of rural students is not clear in terms of nationally standardized tests because the rural definition is not clear. Even though it is difficult to pinpoint achievement, it is clear that in small schools with limited resources, the number of vocational and elective courses that can be offered to students is restricted. The rural school often lacks the staff to successfully compete in the maze of federal grants and contract programs. Historically, there has been a decline in the number of local schools. In 1930, there were 128,000 local school districts; in 1980 there were about 15,000. What has happened to these students, their schools, and their community heritage?

Robert E. Herriott of ABT Associates comments on the dynamics of rural school districts and the limits of change on their students and resources in the draft report of findings from the Experimental Schools program Federal Initiatives and Rural School Improvement. (Copy attached)

The rural school administrator is often distinguished from his urban

counterpart by the many simultaneous roles they accomplish. We were introduced to Mr. Orlick, a not-present superintendent from a small rural school of 600 students, K-12. He serves as Title I director, federal programs officer, bus driver, mechanic, football coach, band sponsor, senior class sponsor, business manager, purchasing agent and curriculum director, energy coordinator, testing director and teacher of senior social studies. The question for the state facilitaotr is how to serve his many-hatted person in the most effective way for him and his students.

The solutions to service for rural schools are as many and varied as the school environments they serve. It is clear from our work as state facilitators that the time span from pre-awareness to adoption of a project may range to four years. This average is difficult for many developer demonstrators (DD) to understand, but they must realize some adoptions take six years. A few programs are adopted after initial awareness, but they are often preceeded by the caring and nuturing necessary to make the school receptive to a change. The analogy for rural schools is often a reference to farming and agriculture land preparation. Rural schools are often found in stony ground choked with weeds and a few magnificent old trees filled with wood rot and decaying from within. In such an environment a great deal of time must be spent in the preparation of the land to accept the seed of change. One of the major hurdles for innovations is the fear of doing something no one else has done. The NDN has removed much of this fear. There is an intrisic mistrust of federal government among many rural constituencies, which places the facilitator in the role of mediator to deliver positive

education products. The solution to overcoming this fear is linked to strong personal contacts between the facilitator and the school. The aspect of the school's knowing the facilitator will be back at a later date and will be around to service the school is difficult to overcome when facilitator personnel changes occur. For effective program spread and adoption, the link of the facilitator person with their institution is the credibility bridge necessary to secure successful long-term adoptions.

Within this framework the use of demonstration sites within the service area of the facilitator or in similar rural settings is a positive approach to program adoption. The demonstration sites must be able to provide the visiting school an honest atmosphere of success with the program, encouragement for adoption and local commitment to the continued use of the project. With sites available near the adopting school there is a feeling of being a part of a large successful whole. Schools are more likely to implement the key elements with fidelity over time.

The demonstration site may be a key element to adoption in rural areas, but the use of broad spread is necessary for awareness groups are often small, fewer than 20 people. The DD is sometimes skeptical of these groups, but in a school of ten teachers, one person is representative of a larger percentage of the faculty than in a school of 4,000 teachers when 20 attend an awareness. This one teacher representative is often not only the person who will implement and keep records of the project, but the one whose success will determine the possibility of other projects being accepted at that school in the future. The ground the facilitator "plows" for awareness is done with brochures, the Programs

That Work book, contacts with university staff offering courses, training for a university staff to provide training to the local area schools, news releases, sending people to nearby awareness and training, the Title I conferences, journal articles, quiet talks over coffee, noisy talks in the lunchroom and that ever-present constant personal concern for the local schools problems and their feeling that the SF is actively seeking a program for them. In addition to the use of sites, the most successful spread in rural schools is often a satisfied user from nearby sharing with other teachers at a professional meeting their desire and concern for the use of a project. The network needs to consider the clear role of demonstration sites and the future expansion of satellite clone sites that are better than the original developer site as a part of the funding pattern for projects.

The DD must realize the slow nature of accepting change in rural areas and the long-term effects of negative reaction to any one of the previous DD projects that have come before. Rural people are often concerned about the appearance of the presenter at the first glance than the nature of the awareness or training they are to receive. The state facilitator plays a key role in preparing the audience for the DD and the project. There is a need for more programs that have rural roots to develop the camaraderie among schools with the original DD sites necessary for fidelity of adoption.

Successful spread of NDN projects in rural schools must rely on the local resources and the flexibility of the DD in meeting local awareness needs. There may be a request for a videotape awareness, for filmstrips, for slide stories or an interactive telephone linkwhere the SF prepares the audience and shows a filmstrip, then via a speaker phone the partic-

ipants talk to the DD while they are in a different part of the nation. The rural areas of the future need some thought for the use of communication of projects. In small rural schools, if one decision-maker is convinced the product is appropriate to the school, and the developer has a compatable personality trait, future training and follow up are more likely to be successful.

The cost of projects in rural schools is a concern relative to the amount of time and energy needed for a level of student gain. With a very few students, the increases due to using a new product must be large for the majority of students to justify cost, because the decline of a few students may statistically reduce achievement standings of an entire class.

The rural school environment may be one of the best places to consider as a site for state conventions in reading, mathematics, gifted, special education and other areas. Local persons doing awareness are often a strength in that they are able to provide the creditability necessary for adoption. The lack of curriculum coorinators within the rural system makes the facilitator's job critical. The DD must trust the decisions the facilitator makes about awareness and training.

The concern of facilitators in the rural school of 500 students K-12 is of teacher isolation from new and positive ideas. The problems of getting people to attend awareness sessions come from distance, a lack of substitute teachers and cost.

Intermediate agencies serve a key role in the spread and adoption of programs in rural schools due to their proximity to the constituents and information on/about local needs. These service agencies often delegate to others the actual attendance and follow-up tasks for the

facilitator. This spread of involvement with others strengthens the adoptive process, helps the network and ties the adopting school closer to the original developer. For an effective adoption, in a rural area, the idea must emanate from the energy center in the area. This may be a teacher, principal, state department regional service unit or an individual that is providing the spark and initiative necessary for the consideration of a program. This energy center needs to provide the secure connections to assure open communications among the DD, SF, and adopting schools.

The most valuable link in many rural areas is the telephone contact. The follow-up and personal nature of phone use provides a link among the school energy centers considering a program and often leads to lateral linkages among other need areas for the local school. The key element in any project's success is teacher interest and enthusiasm. This interest comes from student success and improvement. The Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP) process and network funding criteria have lead to successful produst being available and capable of providing the necessary student success.

The NDN is not known among teachers; rather, they identify with a particular project that is operational within their district. Administrators mostly know about the network through the facilitators and their concerns for proposals and funding. Follow-up of adoptions by and DDs needs to continue for years (5 to 10) after adoption, for investigation has found successful implementation and adoptions in stressful school environments even when all outside factors point to a disoriented staff or administrator. The conservative nature of rural schools can and does produce active adoptions. Monitoring of program implementation is difficult from the

state facilitator point of view because the majority of problems are program specific and require an indepth understanding of the project. The state facilitator can suggest a call to the DD, but it is long distance and often does not occur. The DD needs to take a more active role in phone contact with adopters, arrange for a letter with answers to commonly asked questions to be mailed to all potential and recorded adopters, and even persons having had awareness. Adoptions are sometimes not complete due to a question at the energy center that is not answered in the awareness material and is never asked of the DD or SF.

Within the network of programs offered, there is a need to clarify DD projects that are applicable or can be adopted for the one self contained classroom with two-grade levels versus the single subject classroom and the small class needs to be stated by DD's. A rural strategy and an urban strategy may need to be developed by some DD's in their training and program plans for adoptions. There is a need for more developers from the rural area. This is very difficult because a small staff in rural schools is unable to dedicate the time and resources to grant writing. States' considerations for innovative money concentrate on developmental projects with state-wide significance, and the reduction in funds under the Title IV-C and other federal education programs limits the seed money for rural projects. The requirements for indepth needs assessments and evaluation requirements must be written with the rural prespective. A school district with 25 students in grade 4 may not need to conduct a full-scale, written, community-involved needs assessment to document a specific curriculum need. Local districts need help in developing news releases and model communication guides in order that they may keep their community informed of the work of local schools in

sharing educational success with other districts in the nation and their states.

The rural school concerns are one of self-identification and true desire to help students learn what they will need to be successful in the real world of work, university studies and other life pursuits. Rural people take a personal interest in their schools and in the children, and are often willing to make sacrifices if the potential goal will be greater student flexibility and capability in meeting life goals. The rural schools are isolated geographically and pedogogically and are in need of nuturing and direct assistance from the network.

These comments are a summary reproduction from notes of the recorder at the NDN meeting and have been reviewed and edited by the original presenters. The views do not represent any agency or individual, but are the collective impressions of the writers.

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FEDERAL INITIATIVES AND RURAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: FINDINGS FROM THE EXPERIMENTAL SCHOOLS PROGRAM (DRAFT)

Robert E. Herriott, Abt Associates, Inc.
May 1979

This document is a preliminary draft of the capstone report which summarizes findings of the 17 research reports included in Abt Associates' study of the Experimental Schools Program for Small Schools Serving Rural Areas (National Institute of Education). This concluding report is directed primarily to those at the federal level responsible for the design and/or implementation of programs to facilitate educational improvement at the local level.

Based on an extensive research effort,* this document summarizes findings from literature on the educational needs of contemporary rural America, notes the relevance of the Experimental Schools (ES) Program to those needs and presents the major findings of the research in terms of:

- The dynamics of rural school districts
- The design and implementation of federal programs to facilitate rural school improvement

Program Design

The Experimental Schools (ES) Program was originally funded through the U.S. Office of Education and later transferred to the National Institute of Education. This pilot effort began in 1972; a limited number of rural schools (ten) were awarded extensive multi-year grants for the purpose of planning and implementating locally designed projects of educational change. It was

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*The Abt Associates' study of the ES Program has led to production of 14 technical reports; 40 articles, book chapters or research monographs; 21 papers presented at professional meetings; and two synthesis reports.

expected that at the end of the five-year funding period each district would be markedly different educationally, while operating at approximately the expenditure level that had existed prior to involvement in the ES project. An emphasis on community involvement in project design and operation was seen by federal planners as essential. The intent was to increase the validity of the identification of major educational needs within the district and to assure community support essential for continuing successful project components when federal funding ended. A "formative evaluation" component was required of each project district, including collection of data about project effectiveness which could be used by local decision makers.

The ES Program utilized only a direct federal-local funding route, largely in response to federal officials who viewed the state as an impediment to effective local change. Herriott cites Kirst (1979) in suggesting that there is much in the ES experience to be learned about "federally induced local reform. . .(when). . . the 'state middleman' is not in the picture."

Findings

Because this is a report of research on only one federal program (and ten rural school districts), Herriott cautions that it is limited in generalizability to all rural districts. Still, there is a wealth of detailed information about the dynamics of planned educational change within the ten districts studied.

Findings Related to the Dynamics of Rural School Districts

1. The multiple functions of rural schools. Those who design or implement federal programs to facilitate local change efforts need to recognize that rural schools have many and varied functions. Diverse expectations of rural schools include:

- Basic skills acquisition
- Balance between college preparatory and vocational curricula
- Preparation of youth for careers within the community
- Preparation which leads to career (and geographic) mobility
- Community pride and identity (especially through athletic programs)
- Major employer, particularly of college-educated personnel

Federal program planners need to recognize that plans for curricular change which they seek to have implemented may be of only minor importance to rural schools and may, in fact, conflict with other functions of schools which are valued highly.

2. The conflict between stability and change in rural communities. Tensions between those who prefer things as they are and those who envision positive changes are particularly active in rural communities. Federally stimulated change efforts may support goals of rural educators, but at the risk of antagonizing groups in the community who prefer stability to change. Such conflict can lead to high staff turnover in rural districts as educators find little support for their "cosmopolitan" ideas for school improvement.

3. The recency and nature of school district consolidation. The processes of both consolidation and annexation, most of which have occurred in the past twenty years, have created school districts which bear little resemblance to the community units served. Such school districts have great difficulty integrating educational endeavors into their larger social fabric and may, in fact, become the focus of concerns which would be directed at other agencies of local government in more integrated communities. If the consolidation process was resisted, as many were, a federal program with even the slightest hint of "unexpected strings" can be threatening if perceived as the imposition of another external initiative.

4. The size, geographical dispersion and population density of school districts. Rural school districts vary considerably in the number of pupils served, the number of teachers and administrators employed, the physical location of buildings and the density of their populations.

Many rural communities employ small administrative staffs in order to keep operating costs lower and reduce the number of people "not engaged in productive work." This can mean that time for preparing sophisticated proposals to federal agencies is limited and that little expertise is available for planning and implementing the resulting projects if the proposal effort was successful.

5. The heterogeneous nature of rural populations. The process of consolidation and annexation has created serious social, ethnic and racial cleavages in many rural communities; these constitute major impediments to planned educational change. Those groups without power at the local level are frequently targets of federal initiatives; but educators at the local level responding to such initiatives are often poorly prepared to accomplish the federal goals.

6. The limited and precarious economic base. Changes resulting from demographic and economic forces over which they had no control have led many members of rural communities to regard with skepticism external initiatives having long-term financial implications at the local level.

Great variability exists in the willingness of rural schools to invest in education. Although the ES Program provided an opportunity for school districts to plan and implement projects which would make more effective use of limited and shrinking resources, such an initiative did not generally produce a more effective educational system along the lines envisioned by federal planners.

7. Rural fears of federal colonialism. Although few rural communities refuse federal funding, they approach it with great suspicion. Many of their experiences with "the feds," whether Department of Agriculture, Department of the Interior or whatever, have left them wary of their ability to maintain local autonomy in the face of further federal ties.

8. The shifting balance of power and authority among rural teachers, administrators and school boards. Strikes, collective bargaining and teacher militancy are no longer foreign issues to many rural communities. Thus, the study found that the assumption of an authority structure within rural school districts in which the school board sets policy to be implemented by administrators through teacher compliance is in error. In addition, it was found that the power and authority of teachers, administrators and boards is unsettled in rural communities as well as in urban areas. The idea that rural school boards surrender their authority over rural education to professional educators is inaccurate. Highly presciptive federal change efforts are, according to Herriott, likely to become enmeshed in, or even irritative of, local conflicts over teacher autonomy.

9. Citizen reservations regarding the professional license of educators. Rural communities seem, according to the report, to be particularly puzzling with respect to just what can be left to the professional judgement of educators and what must be decided by local citizens. Under conditions of conflict between teachers and administrators or teachers and the school board, ordinarily passive rural citizens can become highly active, not necessarily to impose their will, but resume tranquility to the educational situation. Change efforts which link local educators with federal officials often produce these types of conflicts; change may be more likely to be seen in board, administrative or teacher turnover than in the educational system.

Findings Related to the Design and Implementation of Federal Programs to Facilitate Rural School Improvement

Federal aid to local education is generally justified at the federal level as being needed to assist or motivate local educational agencies in adapting to changing national priorities. Programs are designed within legislative constraints at the federal level; implementation is carried out primarily at the local level. Although the formal grant or contract is intended to limit the range of local actions to those consistent with federal design, most are sufficiently ambiguous to create a need for active federal monitoring. The following findings center around twelve problem areas which program planners and project officers are likely to face.

1. The "two culture" problem. According to Herriott there is an inherent tension among federal, state and local levels of government due to the very nature of American federalism. In the case of programs with direct federal-local funding the state is usually unavailable to serve as a buffer between any possible excess of federal initiative and local resistance. Thus, he points out, the two cultures of the "locals" and the "feds" can come into serious conflict.

The ES Program set out to be of genuine assistance to ten rural school districts, but the study found the effort was largely ineffective because of the program's lack of ability to function successfully within the culture of the federal bureaucracy in a manner sympathetic with the cultural requirements and values of the rural districts it was attempting to help.

This report suggests that there is an important message in the ES experience for all at the federal level who desire to facilitate rural school improvement through direct federal-local funding. It is essential to understand well the culture of the federal bureaucracy and of those rural communities with which it is to be linked, and then develop mechanisms for successfully

buffering those aspects of each which might serve as obstacles to accomplish shared objectives.

2. The specification of program goals. Although the intent of most federal legislation directed toward American public education is the enhancement of pupil knowledge and skills, this focus may become displaced during program design and negotiations. The occurrence of this phenomena is reported in the study of the ES Program; an early emphasis on pupil change shifted to one on system change and finally to change in particular curricular components. Hence researchers were not suprised to find no systematic evidence of pupil change which could be attributed to a district's participation in the program.

The study reports that comprehensive change, such as that attempted through the ES Program, can be highly disruptive of normal school functioning and can result in a lowering of pupil test scores. The seriousness and realism of goals of pupil change need to be carefully assessed therefore in both program implementation and its evaluation.

3. The specification of program scope. The Experimental Schools Program was intended "to find out whether new educational programs, which address all parts of an educational system simultaneously, will be more effective than past efforts which have focused on only one or several parts of an educational system at a time." (HEW, 1972)

The Abt study found great variation in the degree of comprehensive change attempted by each of the ten districts; only one district attempted the type of dramatic change envisioned by ES Program designers. Effects of change on the ten districts led the researchers to conclude that dramatic educational change as an objective of federal initiatives in rural school districts is replete with serious obstacles; dramatic change as a strategy

for accomplishing more limited changes which can be continued with local funds is likely to be more viable. Such a strategy is, however, not likely to produce demonstrable pupil change, as the organizational turmoil and conflict which frequently occurs can shift energy and focus away from classroom instruction.

4. The need to plan for program implementation at the federal level. The Experimental Schools Program was designed hastily in response to a Congressional sense of urgency; little of the rational planning expected of the local participants in the program could be observed at the federal level. Such rational planning at the federal level is of particular importance in dealing with small rural districts which may lack experience in dealing effectively with seemingly capricious external agencies.

5. The appropriate unit of project implementation. The ES Program was designed to test the efficacy of a system-wide change effort, but the study showed that little success was achieved in getting "loosely coupled" units within school districts to work collaboratively in planning for comprehensive educational change. In those districts where collaborative planning did occur, it was generally dominated by central office administrators; only two districts successfully implemented comprehensive system-wide change. In each case, conflict leading to resignations of key administrators occurred and few project components were retained once federal funding terminated. The most successful implementations were found in districts where responsibility had passed from central office personnel to those directly involved in the schools where change was to take place.

6. The criteria for site selection. The program objective of facilitating and implementing comprehensive educational change was best achieved in those districts with prior successful change experiences. Those sites selected on the basis of need failed to implement the type of systematic changes

envisioned in the ES Program. Federal reaction to the "failures"--unplanned technical assistance intervention and aggressive contract monitoring--tended to be disruptive.

7. The degree of guideline specificity. During the planning year which followed site selection, rural school officials repeatedly protested the lack of specificity of federal intent, particularly when local plans were repeatedly rejected as unacceptable at the federal level. Rural school districts prefer to strike explicit bargains and stick with it rather than engage in continuous negotiations.

8. The role of a planning document. Shifting priorities at the federal level during the planning year of the ES Program left the ten districts extremely uncertain as to whether the planning document was to facilitate action at the local level or serve as compliance monitoring at the federal level. This report suggests that managers of direct federal-local funding programs carefully consider the role of the planning process and clarify whether the resulting document (proposal or plan) is primarily intended to serve as a federal compliance document or as a guide to local action. Given the two cultures of Washington, D.C. and rural America, as noted earlier, it is highly unlikely that the same document can be used for both purposes.

9. The appropriate duration of federal funding. Although the ES Program did achieve federal funding commitments greater than the typical one-year period, the study findings suggest that credible funding vehicles for obligating the federal government over multi-year periods need to be established. The study did support the concept that federal initiatives designed to facilitate systematic changes in rural school districts definitely require funding commitments of longer than one year.

10. The appropriate balance between local participation and federal monitoring. The benefits of broad-based decision making, as advocated in the ES

Program, were undermined when the federal monitoring process required districts to make major revisions in their draft plans on short notice. Federal program planners who value the role which teachers, students and citizens can plan in the planning process must, according to Herriott, be alert to the need to insulate the local planning process from the pressures of the federal funding cycle, its associated deadlines and other aspects of bureaucracy.

11. The design of program evaluation. The Experimental Schools Program was intended primarily as an R&D effort whereby knowledge gained in the ten sites would be widely disseminated. It was also expected that local decision making would be both rational and based on competent formative evaluation. However, only one of the ten districts had any systematic experience with formative evaluation and virtually all districts struggled throughout the program with the concept. The study reports that none of the ten districts achieved the degree of commitment to or technical skill in formative evaluation anticipated.

12. The provision of appropriate technical assistance. The designers of the Experimental Schools Program recognized that the ten rural school districts would need extensive technical assistance in the planning and implementation of change efforts, but did not anticipate the difficulty project officers would have in assisting the districts in acquiring help. The rural school districts tended to prefer external experts with strong ties to their local cultures; federal officials tend to value most highly experts with cosmopolitan experience and reputation.

Because of this, project monitors often assumed roles as "project advisors" or "technical assistance specialists"--roles possibly more appropiately played by a third party. Findings of the Abt study of the ED Program suggest the need for federal sponsorship of a broad group of well-trained technical assistance specialists knowledgeable in the substance and technology of educational change and able to function successfully at both the federal and the local level.

APPENDIX

Abt Associates' Research

In addition to funding ten local projects, the Experimental Schools Program selected Abt Associates to conduct systematic research. Since its inception in June 1972, Abt Associates' study (here referred to as Project Rural) utilized a multi-method, multi-disciplinary research approach, collecting and interpreting both quantitative and qualitative data. The basic data of Project Rural were collected periodically during a six-year period (1972-78) from:

- Census documents
- Standardized tests and questionnaires administered to pupils at all grade levels
- Survey forms mailed to school personnel and community residents
- Informal and formal interviews with pupils, school personnel and community residents
- Extensive participant observation by experienced sociologists and anthropologists, each of whom resided for over three years in one of the ten school districts involved in this federally stimulated program of planned educational change

The extensive knowledge gathered in these diverse ways has been described, analyzed, and interpreted through a series of fourteen book-like reports presenting:

- A social-psychological study of pupil change across the ten ES districts and also 18 comparison districts selected in 1975 (Abt, Cerva, and Marx, 1978; Abt and Magidson, 1979)
- A sociological study of organiztional change across the ten ES districts (Rosenblum and Louis, 1979)
- A socio-economic study of community change across the ten ES districts (Fitzsimmons and Freedman, 1979)
- A social and educational history of the ten ES school districts prior to 1972 (Fitzsimmons, Wolff and Freedman, 1975)

In addition to these fourteen book-like reports, Abt Associates has also prepared two less technical documents, directed primarily to educational practitioners:

- A book of case studies and subjective cross-site analyses for use in colleges and universities training educators for service in rural areas (Herriott and Gross, 1979)
- A handbook on planning and implementing educational change for use in in-service workshops with superintendents, principals, and special project administrators in rural areas (Deal and Nutt, 1979)

The methods used to understand the process of federally stimulated, planned educational change in rural America vary greatly across these sixteen reports. The most extensive quantitative approach was that employed in conducting a quasi-experimental "black box" analysis of the effects on pupils of a school district's participation in the ES Program. Several reports involved the integration of quantitative survey data collected in all ten school districts with the narrative and statistical accounts of the participant observers. By and large, the broadest range of insight into the dynamics of federally stimulated change in rural areas comes from the eight ethnographic case studies, each presenting extensive description and analysis of local conditions and actions within a single school district. The two synthesis reports draw selected insights from the technical reports and direct them primarily to practitioners. These sixteen reports represent a substantial expansion of the knowledge base available to federal program planners on both rural communities and the process of planned educational change, and can be actively consulted by those responsible for either program design or implementation.

Title: Federal Initiatives and Rural School Improvement: Findings from the Experimental Schools Program (Draft)

Author: Robert E. Herriott
Abt Associates, Inc., May, 1979

Theme: The major findings of the extensive research study of the Experimental Schools (ES) Program are summarized in this capstone document. Findings are presented in terms of the dynamics of rural school districts and as related to the design and implementation of federal programs to facilitate rural school improvement.

Key Points: Those who design or implement federal programs to facilitate local change efforts need to recognize that rural schools have many diverse functions that go beyond basic skills acquisition. Plans for curricular change may actually conflict with other valued functions of the schools.

The process of consolidation and annexation has created serious social, ethnic and racial cleavages in many rural communities; these constitute major impediments to planned change.

Rural community members regard with skepticism external initiatives having long-term financial implications at the local level. In addition, great variability exists in the willingness of rural communities to invest in education.

The power and authority of teachers, administrators and boards is as unsettled in rural communities as it is in urban areas. Highly prescriptive change efforts are likely to become enmeshed in, or even irritative of, local conflicts over teacher autonomy.

Comprehensive change, such as that attempted through the Experimental Schools Program, can be highly disruptive of normal school functioning and can result in a lowering of pupil test scores.

Dramatic educational change as an objective of federal initiatives is replete with serious obstacles; dramatic change as a strategy for accomplishing more limited changes which can be continued with local funds is more likely to be viable. Such a strategy is not likely to produce demonstrable pupil change, as the organizational turmoil and conflict which frequently occurs can shift energy and focus away from classroom instruction.

The ES Program was designed to test the efficacy of system-wide change effort, but the study showed that little success was achieved in getting "loosely coupled" units within school districts to work collaboratively in planning for comprehensive educational change. The most successful implementations were found in districts where responsibility had passed from central office personnel to those directly involved in schools where change was to take place.

During the planning year of the ES Program, rural school officials repeatedly protested the lack of specificity of federal intent, particularly when local plans were repeatedly rejected as unacceptable at the federal level.

Study findings support the concept that federal initiatives designed to facilitate systematic changes in rural school districts definitely require funding commitments of longer than one year.

Rural school districts tend to prefer technical assistance support from external experts with strong ties to their local cultures; federal officials tend to value most highly experts with cosmopolitan expertise and reputation.

Recommendations:

Direct federal-local programs must be able to function successfully within the culture of the federal bureaucracy in a manner sympathetic with the cultural requirements and values of the rural communities they are attempting to help.

The seriousness and realism of goals of pupil change needs to be carefully assessed in both program implementation and program evaluation.

Rational planning at the federal level is of particular importance in dealing with small rural districts which may lack experience in dealing effectively with seemingly capricious external agencies.

Managers of direct federal-local funding programs must clarify whether a document resulting from the local planning process is intended primarily to serve as a federal compliance document or as a guide to local action. It is unlikely that the same document can be used for both purposes.

Federal program planners who value the role teachers, students and citizens can play in the planning process must be alert to the need to insulate the local planning process from the pressures of the federal funding cycle, its associated deadlines, and other aspects of bureaucracy.

There is a need for federal sponsorship of a broad group of well-trained technical assistance specialists knowledgeable in the substance and technology of educational change and able to function successfully at both the federal and the local level.